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Comedy and Controversy: A Close Look at *South Park* and Its Unique Approach to Satire

by Jacob Williams

(English 1101)

The hit Comedy Central show now in its 22nd season stands among the titans of comedy. A vulgar, crass animated series centered around the complicated lives of four third grade boys, *South Park* portrays a world of storylines with comedic parallels to reality. Thorough examination of the show proves there greater meaning to the humor. The parallels found between the real world and the world of South Park do not appear to be random, but in fact a direct connection to something socially or politically relevant to the timing of the episode's release. This paper intends to prove with research that *South Park* serves as a source of both humor and social-political perspective on current events. It will become clear that *South Park* can stand as a reliable take on what is going on in the world, using comedy to deliver its messages.

South Park's humor is often vulgar and gross. The hit television show features a piece of feces as a popular character. The writing uses swear words, bodily functions, and slurs to create comedy (Thorogood, 216). One episode follows Randy Marsh - one of the adults in the town of South Park- as he gives himself testicular cancer in order to qualify for medicinal marijuana. The rest of the men in the town then follow Randy's lead, sticking their testicles in the microwave causing them to become enlarged. What ensues is a ridiculous exaggeration of South Park's men bouncing around town on their oversized testicles. It is a hairy and disgusting visual of nudity that also has a humorous quality. Other examples can be provided from the memory of a long-time viewer. In one episode, the boys stumble onto a violent blood orgy of woodland critters. In another episode, a boy is fed the butchered remains of his parents. After watching any of these episodes and without any other context, anyone might be inclined to think that the writers -and fans, subsequently- have a vulgar and disturbing sense of humor. That there is any value to this extreme type of humor is a highly debated topic.

After twenty years of being on the air, the hit television show has often been controversial. According to Thorogood, "The show has generated enormous controversy throughout its history, with a battery of criticisms and a dedicated following of protest groups." (215) Matt Stone and Trey Parker – the masterminds behind the show and its creators – deal in subject matter that has to potential to offend a lot of people. In fact, the two of them are self-described as "Equal Opportunity Offenders" (Thorogood, 216). To Stone and Parker, no topic is off limits and if they can make fun of something – or in other words, if they can come up with a joke – they will. They have even gone so far lately as to incorporate school shootings into episodes, despite the sensitivity and violent nature of the subject. Comedy about the death of children is likely to give rise to a lot of controversy. In another example, the FCC pulled a list of complaints over a three-year period that ended in 2007 (Thorogood, 216). It showed "some particularly memorable complaints from members of the American public concerned with the 'sickening' and 'disgusting' nature of the show, especially its influence on children" (Thorogood, 216). The Comedy Central show can clearly give rise to public offense.

A consistent factor of this offense though, is that people are frequently misunderstanding the greater meaning of *South Park's* humor. As Thorogood says, "*South Park* repeatedly leaves us scratching our heads, working through the lack of finitude in the plot and contradictory subtexts." (230-231). The often morally ambiguous humor is disorienting even to the fans. Also, in a particularly controversial and misunderstood episode titled "The F Word" the boys attempt to

redefine the word ‘fag’. Schulzke contends that the writing in this episode is attempting to make a positive change in the way we use language regarding gay people (30). The episode does in fact send a clear message and represents “sophisticated and strikingly similar to scholarly work on language” (Schulzke, 30). So though the use of the word is usually inappropriate, this particular episode carries a deeper message by using it. *South Park*’s writers make it even more clear what the message is in the episode. In the end, the main characters change the Webster’s Dictionary definition of the word (Schulzke, 28). Many aspects of “The F Word” were unmistakably meant to discourage homophobia. However, certain members of the gay community itself were disturbed by the attempt (Schulzke, 24). It may have been meant to ease the woes of homosexual hate, but the reception was not all positive. Even further on that point, according to Schulzke, “gay activists who supported the series in the past” responded negatively to the episode, calling it “misguided and offensive” (24). In general, the humor was intended to send a helpful message, but for some it was a hurtful one. To further complicate things, the “gay activists” also referred to the humor in “The F Word” as “admirable” in the same description (Schulzke, 24). Understanding of the show’s humor is clearly complex, and largely varying even among a similar audience. In another example of misunderstanding, one episode used a horribly offensive racial slur and was afterwards praised by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) for their “portrayal of white appropriation of the term.” (Thorogood, 216) A misguided and primarily white Parents Television Council (PTC) berated them for the exact same episode (Thorogood, 216). As it turns out, Stone and Parker’s ‘equal opportunity offensiveness’ leaves people quite confused about what the show’s overall message is.

The fact that it can have a message though is evidence that there is a greater meaning and complexity to the TV show’s humor. More than simple gross vulgarity, “*South Park* occupies an ambiguous role, where episodes can be deemed simultaneously progressive and racist, or educational and offensive.” (Thorogood, 216) In other words, *South Park* can offend an audience with toilet humor and teach an intelligent lesson at the same time. Furthermore, Thorogood contends that “*South Park* often celebrates the messy, contradictory and evolving nature of political situations through absurdity and vulgar humour.” (230) The vulgarity acts as a vehicle then, to deliver a more complex message to the viewer. The racism on the show is another example of offensive humor with layers. The episode the NAACP applauded for its “portrayal of white appropriation” (Thorogood, 216) of a racist term towards black people acts as a perfect example. It is clear after watching the episode what its message is. On the surface is humor at the expense of being racist. Yet underneath is an important message on how to change racist behavior. In another example, one of the main characters is frequently antisemitic, which Sienkiewicz and Marx say is “funny because antisemitism is ridiculous, not because Jews really are worthy of disdain and degradation.” (7) So, though the message taken literally is something humorous at the expense of a religion, it can also send the message of tolerance through the proper point of view.

The show can go to disturbing places because it is also a valid argument about a current event or social condition. Sienkiewicz and Marx say about *South Park*: “Through the lens of hyper-irony, offensive humor is mitigated by its turn into a progressive statement.” (8) As Thorogood puts it *South Park* is “comedy that ridicules contemporary issues by reducing complex politics to the most basic and crass condition possible.” (215) By that theory, the vulgarity of the show is a simplification of something much more complex. In the recent episodes revolving around school shootings, the writing reflects a current issue that aligns with what is in the media. The violence is graphic, and the content is potentially offensive to anyone effected by recent tragedies related to gun violence. The show’s audacity to approach such a sensitive subject is granted by the accuracy in which they highlight a social issue. Exaggerating the media representation of the events in the show clearly points to an overreaction of our own media in the real world.

South Park’s complex humor results in a social and political commentary interactive with current events. In a brief explanation, “the show achieves its complexity through a wide and far-

reaching web of connections to other media texts and, crucially, the larger discourses with which these other texts are engaged.” (Sienkiewicz and Marx, 6) So in other words, the writers are using sources of mainstream news, but also sources in the media that further elaborate, analyze, or investigate the mainstream material. There is a wide reach of references to current events and perspectives *South Park* writers will use to come up with episodes on a weekly basis. Writers of the show only start writing an episode one week before it airs however (Sienkiewicz and Marx, 5), allowing them to keep the show fully interactive with current events in their scripts. This keeps them knowledgeable about what is happening within a week prior to the airing of an episode while they write it. The show’s short cycle of creation means that “the offensive elements of the show may take on different meanings by interacting with and commenting on other media texts.” (Sienkiewicz and Marx, 9) For example, school shootings may seem like an unnecessarily violent topic involving children if a viewer did not understand that this was a highly covered topic at the time. Only within the proper understanding of context and timing can a person go back to a *South Park* episode and fully understand the humor (9). So, just like the writers, the audience must also be in-tune with current events to get every laugh. In all, the show effectively delivers a social or political message through comedy.

South Park can stand as a reliable take on what is going on in the world, using comedy to deliver its messages. At its core, it is a comedy show. Yet still there is a deeper meaning to every punchline. Even in the most vulgar moments of the show there is clearly some social commentary involved. What is unclear is whether this discourse is solely meant to humor the masses. Or is it instead to educate them, berate them, or to simply suggest that everything is meaningless? The most likely choice is all the choices, but without speculation it is unclear. The bottom line is that whatever *South Park* is, it certainly transcends from category of traditional comedy into something totally different. Such a form of media is not only consumable for a laugh, but also for the scholarly study of individuals who wish to see the world as it was, in a way no one else was looking.

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